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Classified By: DCM William Grant for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) At long last, the March 14 pro-government coalition has set up a secretariat for internal coordination to develop strategies to boost public (both domestic and international) support and create a unified public relations message. March 14 leaders already have begun an intensive diplomatic offensive abroad, and are stepping up their rhetoric in advance of the February 14 commemoration of the third anniversary of the assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri. Better late than never, we hope that this new initiative will recreate the momentum of the 2005 Cedar Revolution and propel March 14 to legislative victory in 2009. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) March 14 has kicked off its plan to institutionalize the coalition, newly designated March 14 Secretary General Suaid Fares told Pol/Econ Chief and Senior LES Political Advisor in a February 4 meeting. Fares said the new March 14 secretariat had several goals: strengthening its domestic

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base; engaging the Lebanese diaspora; consolidating Christian support; building bridges with independent Shia; improving coordination with the Siniora government; launching an international diplomacy campaign; establishing better media relations and a unified public message; and working on a new electoral law.

INCREASING DOMESTIC SUPPORT

[1](#)3. (C) Fares cited rebuilding trust between March 14 leaders and public opinion as a key goal of the new secretariat to strengthen its electoral base and improve its prospects at the polls in the 2009 legislative elections. To this end,

March 14 plans to establish regional mini-secretariats, including in the south, a Shia stronghold, to build domestic support.

¶4. (C) March 14 also is planning a mass rally on February 14 to commemorate the third anniversary of the assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri, Fares said, which it hopes will reenergize March 14 supporters. March 14 leaders, including Saad Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, Samir Geagea, and Amine Gemayel, will speak at the rally, which also will include the unveiling of a new statue of Rafiq Hariri at the assassination site. In a separate dinner with the Ambassador (Ref A), key March 14 advisors informed us they will bus in supporters, especially women and children, to Beirut to demonstrate March 14's broad support and peaceful objectives.

ENGAGING THE LEBANESE DIASPORA

¶5. (C) Fares said March 14 already has a strong presence among Lebanese in the U.S., UK, and Australia. In the U.S., however, different groups representing Lebanese interests, such as Tom Harb's World Council of the Cedars Revolution, tended to work alone and not coordinate among themselves. March 14 plans to establish an office in Washington supported by Lebanese Ambassador Antoine Chedid to coordinate March 14's activities in the U.S. March 14 already has two representatives in Washington, Toufic Baaklini (who helped organized Jumblatt's visit to Washington in the fall of 2007 and who is a member of the National Alliance of Lebanese Americans, aimed at promoting a united and democratic Lebanon, www.nala.com) and Ramzi Rihani (married to Ghada Bejjani, a former LES from Embassy Beirut).

¶6. (C) Eighty percent of Lebanese Christians in the U.S. are pro-March 14, Suaid claimed, and March 14 has good contacts with Maronite community there (which includes 80 parishes and two bishops), which it will use to build more support.

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CONSOLIDATING CHRISTIAN SUPPORT

¶7. (C) Acknowledging strong divisions among Lebanon's Christians as a major challenge, Fares said another key focus of the secretariat is consolidating Christian support. He described three types of Christians in Lebanon: 1) the proletariat, which tended to support Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea; 2) the middle class, which leaned toward Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun; 3) and the independent intelligentsia, including the likes of former Ambassador to the U.S. and presidential candidate Simon Karam. (Note: Karam is part of an informal group of Christians that meets periodically to discuss the plight of Christians in Lebanon. End note.)

¶8. (C) Suaid also distinguished between two "colors" of Christian leadership: the "weak" ("zumma") Christians, who fear their diminishing influence in the country and therefore seek alliance with Hizballah as the best way to protect their interests, and the "powerful" ("qawayi") Christians, whom he claimed were not a minority but, like Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, were not popular in many Christian communities because of their tainted past during Lebanon's 15 year civil war.

¶9. (C) Noting that generally Lebanese Christians are against Hizballah, Suaid nevertheless admitted that March 14 needed to work to discredit Aoun and improve its image among Aoun supporters to demonstrate that March 14 is not a Sunni-dominated Hariri machine but a means to allow Christians to have a larger voice in the country.

¶10. (C) March 14's good relations with Patriarch Sfeir were

key, Suaid said, noting that he personally had a good relationship with the Secretary General of the Maronite Church, Richard Abi Saleb. The Secretariat will establish an office in Ashrafieh, a Christian neighborhood in Beirut, in an effort to dispel perceptions that March 14 is a merely a tool in Hariri's hand. (Note: Until now, March 14 meetings have been held at Hariri headquarters in Qoreitem. End note.)

BUILDING BRIDGES WITH INDEPENDENT SHIA

¶11. (C) Overcoming Hizballah's monopoly of the Shia vote is another key March 14 objective, Suaid said. The party planned to work with independent Shia leaders such as Mohamad Matar, Lokman Slim, and Mohamad Shameseddin to build better cross-confessional relations. March 14 also would promote a new electoral law based on proportional representation as a way to improve the prospects for independent Shia, Suaid said.

¶12. (C) Note: Matar, Hariri's legal advisor, is involved in assisting Shia economic development; Slim, whose past remarks suggest he is not eager to become one of the "Hariri Shia," heads an NGO called "Let's Go," is involved in organizing youth projects in Beirut's southern suburbs, and is the recipient of MEPI funds to organize a December 2007 conference for "Third Way Shia;" Shamseddine is an academic/journalist who in 2006 authored an article entitled "What it Means to be Shia," which evoked Hizballah's criticism. March 14 will have to overcome perceptions that the independent Shia with whom it collaborates are not perceived as being "bought" by Hariri.

PARTNERSHIP WITH THE PRESS

¶13. (C) Noting that most Lebanese media is pro-opposition (only Hariri's Future TV is 100 percent pro-March 14), Suaid said another goal would be to build better media relations. The Secretariat had enlisted the help of two journalists, one Shia and one Christian (Naseer al-Assad, from Future TV, who compiled a daily press summary for March 14, and Charles Jabbour, pro-Lebanese Forces), to help March 14 develop a unified public relations message and strategy.

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¶14. (C) A first result of these efforts is already visible. Hariri, Jumblatt, and Geagea recently have delivered strong public attacks against the opposition, accusing it of serving Iranian and Syrians interests. They also have warned the opposition that March 14 is ready for confrontation if that is what the opposition is seeking. Fares himself read a March 14 statement on February 10 that called on Lebanese from across the political spectrum to carry on with the battle of independence, safeguard Lebanon, and prevent a Syrian comeback. The statement also rejected the verbal campaign against the Patriarch.

COORDINATING WITH THE SINIORA GOVERNMENT

¶15. (C) Another goal of the new secretariat is to improve coordination with the Siniora government. Sensibilities between Saad Hariri and PM Siniora had hindered the relationship in the past, Suaid admitted. (Note: Saad was not happy with Siniora's appointment as Prime Minister, viewing the position as his rightful inheritance, and vies with Siniora for the support of the Saudis, whom he probably fears favor Siniora as next Prime Minister, should March 14 win the 2009 legislative elections, given Saad's lack of experience.) Suaid named Siniora Senior Advisor Mohamad Chatah and Acting Foreign Minister Tareq Mitri as good interlocutors for March 14 in this regard.

¶16. (C) March 14 already has launched an intensive diplomatic campaign abroad, dispatching leaders to key capitals around the globe. The list of recent activity includes PM Siniora's trips to Saudi Arabia and Cairo another one soon to the region and to Europe; Walid Jumblatt's early February trips to Russia, where he secured a politically significant \$150,000 Russian contribution to the Special Tribunal, which he saw as a blow to Syria, since Russia was viewed as a traditional ally of Syria, and Saudi Arabia; Hariri advisor Ghattas Khoury's trip to Washington in January; Telecom Minister Marwan Hamadeh and others February trip to Paris and Hamadeh's upcoming trip to London; and Geagea's March 10-12 visit to Washington, where he will meet with NSA Hadley and others.

¶17. (C) March 14 also sent a parliamentary delegation to Cairo prior to the January 27 Arab League summit, and presented a seven point communique to the Arab League outlining its support for the Arab League initiative and its determination to elect Michel Sleiman as president. Another March 14 delegation parliamentary delegation (including MPs Antoine Haddad, Solange Gemayel, Henri Helou, Nabil De Freije, Elias Atallah, Michel Mecattaf, and Eddy Abillamato) is traveling to Brussels February 11 - 14 to attend a special EU seminar on the Middle East, Suaid said.

¶18. (C) Noting that Lebanese Christians do not have a good relationship with the Arab world (he cited Amine Gemayel as an example, claiming the Phalange leader is not at ease with Arab leaders), Suaid said a key goal was to seek more Arab support. Although March 14 had excellent contacts in Saudi Arabia, it needed help developing contacts in Jordan and Egypt. It also wanted to improve its relationship with Qatar, which Suaid said was causing problems with Paris (i.e., by inciting them to engage with the Syrians) ever since the Qataris purchased an Airbus contract from the French. He noted that Qatari Minister Abdullah al-Attieh, who owned a home in Lebanon and visits the country often, was a potentially good avenue.

¶19. (C) Suaid named French Envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran as the best March 14 supporter in France, citing his visit to Tehran six months earlier in which he reportedly told Laranjani that the days of civil war between Christians and Muslims were over. March 14 also had a good relationship with FM Kouchner, but needed to work on Levitte.

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ESTABLISHING A NEW ELECTORAL LAW

¶20. (C) Using the draft Boutros law as a base, Suaid said March 14 wanted to establish a new law based on proportional representation, which would help influence Shia communities by giving independent Shia more of a chance. (Note: This law essentially was shelved when the 2006 war between Hizballah and Israel erupted but remains a point of reference for electoral reform. End note.) From a public relations perspective, this was very important to decrease Hizballah's monopoly of Shia votes. Saad Hariri opposed using proportional representation because it would cause his Future Movement to lose votes, but strategically he realized it was important to allow new Shia leaders to emerge, Suaid said.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

¶21. (C) According to Suaid, the idea for the March 14 secretariat came from Druse leader Walid Jumblatt who,

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representing one of the smaller March 14 blocs and the long

battle ahead with Hizballah, realized there was strength in numbers and that March 14 needed to maintain a united front if it is to survive politically. Suaid said Jumblatt is the only "fully" March 14 leader in the majority. Others, however, continue to think in terms of their confessional backing and "small politics" first. Saad Hariri, the leader of the largest bloc and, in Fares' opinion, still thinking primarily in terms of Sunni interests, was beginning to think more strategically, while Christian leaders Samir Geagea (Lebanese Forces) and Amine Gemayel (Phalange) continue to think in terms of their own parties' interests first. Laughing, Suaid noted, because of the many big egos among March 14's leaders, he had arranged for large flags from each party to be present in the office, with only a smaller Lebanese flag.

¶22. (C) Suaid noted that neither Gemayal nor Geagea were members of the Qornet Shewan (a precursor to March 14 whose priority was the withdrawal of the Syrians from Lebanon). March 14's interests were with the western world, so the Christians needed to be firmly on board. Suaid claimed he had been chosen as Secretary General because he was one of the few March 14 Christians who was not objectionable to either Geagea or Gemayel.

¶23. (C) Note: Numerous sources have indicated there is some sensitivity on the part of Geagea, who aspires to be March 14's Christian spokesman. In a January 31 meeting with the DCM and Pol/Econ Chief, Jumblatt stressed the need for Geagea, whose Lebanese Forces have a bloody past with the army, to maintain a lower profile in the wake of the January 31 clashes in which Lebanese Forces snipers were accused of the killings, accusations that have since disappeared. However, according to Jumblatt, fifty percent of the voters in the Christian neighborhood involved in the clashes -- also the site of the 1975 bus attack that sparked the civil war -- are against both Aoun and Geagea. End note.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE OPPOSITION'S ERRORS -----

¶24. (C) March 14 currently has an opportunity to use recent errors committed by the opposition to its advantage, Suaid said. Hizballah recently lost "three safety belts": the army, the Maronite church, and Christian support in general. Following the January 27 clashes between Shia protesters and the LAF, Suaid claimed there is now a "cold war" between Hizballah and Sleiman, whom he described as "afraid" and in a "bad position." Geagea labeled the January 27 events as a "trap" set for Sleiman, and was capitalizing on them to press for March 14 going ahead with a simple majority vote, though his March 14 partners were quick to caution him that the time was not ripe.

¶25. (C) March 14 was determined to continue to demonstrate its support for Sleiman's candidacy as president and, was in

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almost daily contact with him. The Egyptians also were pushing his candidacy hard, with Military Intelligence Chief Omar Sleiman's representative in Beirut meeting with Sleiman every day, Suaid claimed.

¶26. (C) The recent attacks by Marada leader Suleiman Franjieh and Aoun on the Patriarch were also strategic mistakes on the part of the opposition, Suaid said, which would likely lead to some Christians viewing March 14 more favorably.

LOGISTICS AND OPERATIONAL PLANS -----

¶27. (C) Suaid confirmed that March 14 would enlist the support of ISF Intelligence Branch Chief Wissan Hassan and the LAF for security. The Secretariat will also be responsible for developing a March 14 archive. It planned to

meet once a week as a low-profile working group. Suaid said he was working on a paper outlining the Secretariat's organizational structure and goals that he would present to March 14 leaders (and share with Post) in the near future.

¶28. (C) The March 14 representatives in the Secretariat are: Wael Abu Faour, representing Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, Michel Mecattaf representing the Phalange party, Eddy Abillama, representing Lebanese Forces, Nader Hariri representing the Future movement, Antoine Haddad, representing the Democratic Renewal movement of Nassib Lahoud, and Samir Franjeh, a Christian who was a member of the Qornet Shewan.

HOW THE U.S. CAN HELP

¶29. (C) Suaid confirmed that he had been in touch with Chris Reid, the International Republican Institute's (IRI) communications strategist who has been on the ground since September 2007 with a MEPI-funded project to improve March 14's message coordination. Suaid said IRI, using its strong internet network, could help especially by monitoring journals and providing statistics (i.e., on issues like support for Aoun) to help March 14 develop a more favorable public opinion and strategies for countering Aoun's influence. (Note: Reid, whose first few months were characterized by low levels of support and participation by March 14th party leaders, sees the establishment of the secretariat as a positive sign. He will shortly submit a

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proposal for supplemental MEPI funds to improve his technical capabilities to hold daily morning teleconferences to coordinate strategic messages. End Note.)

¶30. (C) To assist March 14 in achieving its goals, the U.S. should provide March 14 representatives and visitors to Washington with assistance in setting up meetings with USG officials, invite independent Shia leaders to the U.S., continue funding groups like IRI that can fill a critical gap in March 14's strategic needs while also maintaining a relatively low USG profile, and urge governments in Arab, EU, UN Security Council and other capitals to welcome March 14 delegations and express strong public support for March 14. (Note: Samir Geagea will be in Washington March 10-12. End note.)

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